



Figure 5. The Gulf of Georgia Cannery circa 1900.

Vancouver Public Library

Early Buildings on Steveston's Cannery Row

By Edward Mills and Duncan Stacey

The village of Steveston, located about twenty miles south of Vancouver on the mouth of the Fraser River, has been a major centre for the British Columbia fishing industry since the 1880s. Today its waterfront still contains architectural vestiges which date from the formative period of one of the province's most important industries. Awareness of the historical significance of these surviving buildings has slowly emerged over the past decade, but most remain threatened by major impending changes to the waterfront area.

Steveston's durability as a fishing and canning site stems from its strategic location at the mouth of the most productive salmon river in the province. By 1900, some 48 canneries were in operation on the lower Fraser, with seventeen concentrated on a one and one-half mile stretch at Steveston. The Fraser salmon run was nevertheless prone to drastic fluctuations which had pronounced effects on the canning industry. Large catches and expanding markets encouraged rapid expansion while lean years forced cannery closures and consolidation. The boom years of the 1890s were followed by cyclical dips and rises in the annual runs. The most calamitous year

was 1917, when the salmon run was almost entirely wiped out as a result of railway blasting at Hell's Gate on the upper Fraser four years earlier. This resulted in the closure of all but eighteen river canneries on a temporary or permanent basis. Of those that closed permanently, some found new uses as net lofts, warehouses, salteries or boat-building lofts while others were dismantled, burned, or incorporated into surviving cannery facilities along the waterfront.

At present, four pre-1900 cannery buildings remain intact along the waterfront. Remnants of two others, the Imperial and Phoenix, may survive as components of later canneries. The Imperial plant is still operational. Located at the furthest downstream point is the 1894, Gulf of Georgia cannery, which remained operational until 1979. Unlike other early examples in the area, this building retains much of its production machinery, which dates from various periods in the industry's development. Its lengthy productive life is reflected in the numerous structural modifications which were made to accommodate changes in canning technology. The building has recently been acquired by Parks Canada as the future interpretative site of the west coast fishing industry (Fig. 5).



Figure 6. Pacific Coast Cannery as it looked in 1983. The "L" configuration common to pre-1900 canneries is clearly seen in this photo.

Several hundred yards upstream from the Gulf of Georgia, two former canneries stand on wooden piles below the high water mark. Although virtually all waterfront buildings were originally set on pilings, most are now relocated on landfill obtained from dredging operations and faced with metal or concrete rip-rap retaining walls. The first of these is the 1893, Pacific Coast Cannery, which was last operational in the fateful year of 1917. It was subsequently covered for use as a fish warehouse. In recent years it has been employed as a gear storage locker by local fishermen (Fig. 6). Immediately next to the Pacific Coast is the former Britannia Cannery, the oldest structure on the waterfront, and possibly the earliest surviving cannery on the west coast.

Built in 1890, the Britannia remained in production until 1917, when it was converted into a shipbuilding facility. This entailed removing a central section from the structure to accommodate a marine ways for winching fish boats from the river. The building retains its original board and batten sheathing, unlike other former canneries which were eventually re clad with corrugated metal, asphalt shingles or shiplap (Fig. 7).

Further upstream is the 1895, Colonial Cannery which also closed in 1917, but was subsequently converted into a saltery, and later into a net loft. This building was incorporated into the large Paramount Cannery complex during the 1950s, but remained structurally intact.



Figure 7. The Britannia Cannery and its adjacent net loft, as they appeared before 1918. The net loft was destroyed by fire in 1918, and the Britannia was later converted into a boat building facility.

The survival of the Colonial, Britannia, Pacific Coast and Gulf of Georgia canneries was ultimately attributable to their massive timber frame construction, which permitted their adaptation to other uses in the industry. Structural strength was initially dictated by the functional demands of the canning process. All pre-1900 canneries were characterized by a distinctive "L" shape configuration, consisting of a main gable section which jutted out over the river, and a smaller side wing, also gabled, which projected downstream. The main block housed the canning equipment on its lower floor, and the canned salmon in the loft above. The immense weight of both the machinery and products imposed the need for substantial construction.

The smaller side wing was initially used for fish gutting operations. The downstream placement of this section ensured that offal would be carried downstream by the current. The introduction of an automatic butchering machine in 1906, eliminated the need to employ large labour forces for fish cleaning, and consequently, canneries built after that year no longer featured the side wing.

As noted above, most early waterfront buildings were initially placed on timber pilings below the high water mark. Land above that level was protected by a dike which also served as a footpath connecting the various plants and the village of Steveston. It also functioned as a sort of main street for the unique community composed of the living quarters of the various ethnic groups who were employed as fishermen, cannery workers and in subsidiary industries such as boatbuilding. Each cannery was flanked by living quarters for its seasonal workers. These consisted of bunkhouses for the various bachelor groups—the Chinese in particular—as well as residences for family groups. The cannery companies either built these dwellings or supplied wood to workers who built their own. The result was a shanty town that stretched along both sides of the dike, containing the houses of Japanese, Chinese, Native Indians (during the earliest years) and Europeans, as well as boat building sheds and commercial shops that catered to the local residences (Fig. 8). Some houses on the lower side of the dike were constructed on floats so that their owners could move them seasonally in search of work.

Unfortunately, few remnants of this former dike community now remain. Many buildings were destroyed by periodic fires that devastated the waterfront. The strong Japanese presence was removed in 1942 with their detention and confiscation of their properties. A further factor was the continuing process of consolidation in the fishing industry, which saw most small properties along the waterfront gradually bought up by the major fish packing firms.

The former Japanese and Chinese presence on the Steveston waterfront is tenuously represented by a cluster of three turn-of-the century buildings which are slated for removal in the near future. These include a former Japanese fishermen's residence, a Chinese bunkhouse, and a Japanese boatbuilder's shed. The two residences are board-and-batten or wood-shingles structures that sit on piles below the dike (Fig. 9). The Japanese house was originally divided to provide living quarters for four families, while the larger Chinese building functioned as a dormitory for as many as 100 male cannery workers, a reminder that Chinese were prohibited from bringing spouses into the country. Both buildings offer clues to the way of life of the principal ethnic groups engaged as fishermen and cannery workers at Steveston during the first decades of this century. The nearby Kishi boatbuilding shop is located inland from the dike, with a marine ways leading down to the waterfront. It has remained in use by the Kishi family from the time of its founding up to the present, with the exception of the 1942-54 period. This boat shop offers a unique opportunity to observe the type of facilities in which a large proportion of the west coast fishing fleet were constructed and serviced over the years.

All three structures are slated for demolition as part of the current program to upgrade fleet facilities in the area. While this program is simply the latest phase in the continual process of change to meet the needs of the fishing industry, it promises a major physical transformation for the Steveston waterfront, including construction of new moorage ponds and extensive commercial and residential development on property adjacent to Cannery Row. The first major



E. Mills

Figure 8. Former Chinese shops on Steveston dike as seen in 1974. This group was demolished several years ago.

casualties will be the smaller subsidiary buildings erected by early Japanese and Chinese workers. While the survival of the Gulf of Georgia cannery seems assured, the long-term prospects for other early canneries is less certain. It is with a sense of urgency that Parks Canada historians are attempting to document the histories of these buildings and their former occupants through interviews with long-time members of the Steveston fishing community who have witnessed the evolution of the waterfront over the past five decades.



E. Mills

Figure 9. Japanese fishermen's house (left) and Chinese Bunkhouse (right) surviving remnants of the former dike community, 1984.